

DARK ETERNITY

Jonathan Edelstein

One of the joys of getting to put together an anthology like this is having a chance to showcase some up-and-coming authors to new audiences. Jonathan Edelstein is a finalist for the Jim Baen Memorial Short Story Award, and has had short stories published in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Strange Horizons, Escape Pod, and Intergalactic Medicine Show. Though his twentieth story published, “Dark Eternity” will be his first published in a physical book.

The story shares a universe with several of his previously published short stories, “First Do No Harm” (Strange Horizons, 2015), “The Starsmith” (Escape Pod, 2016), “The Stranger in the Tower” (Andromeda Spaceways, 2019), and “Iya-Iya” (Kaleidotrope, 2019), so if you find yourself liking Jonathan’s stories of those seeking renewal and knowledge in a universe recovering from a dark age, be sure to seek them out.



Ishyanga wasn’t one of the worlds they taught about in the universities of Mutanda. It was a colony of the Third Migration and not one of the successful ones: it had lost contact even before the Union fell, and few had called there since. Its continents were cold and metal-poor, and the crops humans favored didn’t grow well there; the people hung on as fishermen and herders along coasts and lakeshores, vassals of an awantu king.

They didn’t teach of Ishyanga in the universities: there were only a few books deep in the libraries and fragments of restored computer files. But those were enough to bring Kalonde there: those, a ruined city, scraps of cloth, and a trail of pebbles.



Kalonde had one of the pebbles in her hand when she came out of the ichiyawafu. She'd dreamed of the voice it recorded, a high ecstatic keening surrounded by a roaring gale. She'd dreamed of the speaker as well; a bulbous gray being with broad wings and a barbed tail soaring through the violent thermals of a gas giant, a dim red sun shadowed in the clouds. The voice, she knew, was true; the image, she had no way of knowing. Those who traveled through the ichiyawafu, the space outside space, often dreamed of the dead, but the dreams weren't always true ones, and no human had ever gone to the world where the recording had been made.

The antiquarian in Kalonde wanted to find that world. But the seeker in her was after another prize. The voices recorded on the pebbles, all but three of them, were of no more than passing interest; her quarry was the race that had made them and scattered them all through this region of space. She had hoped, once, that the ichiyawafu might give her a dream of them, but in a hundred journeys between worlds, it never had.

If she were to find them, it would have to be in a more prosaic place.

She woke fully from the ichiyawafu-dream to the view of such a place, a world of mottled blues, greens and browns that filled the viewports of her ship. Other prosaic things met her eyes to either side: the clutter of the ship's cabin, a scattering of tools, the instruments that told her she was two hours from landing. And the images that hung on the walls—images of the Umfwantu, the Listeners.

There were legends of the Listeners throughout this end of explored space, and they went back many thousands of years—before the Union rose and fell, before the Commonwealth and the Association and the Accord, before the Three Migrations ever began. And for almost as many millennia, explorers and traders had collected those legends and brought them back to the universities of Mutanda. All the stories agreed that the Listeners had come to many worlds and scattered voice-pebbles before leaving, but beyond that, they had little in common. The images on the walls came from those legends—some from explorers' accounts and some that Kayonde herself had collected; fragments of books, sculptures from ancient markets, replications of cave paintings—and they were different enough that they couldn't possibly depict the same race.

Some of the legends said the Umfwantu were shape-changers.

Kayonde had never heard of such a thing in the real universe—color-changers, yes—but the stories she’d collected in seventy years of travel were enough to make her wonder.

Maybe soon she would learn.

There was one at least, an awantu king, who’d sought the Listeners before her. There were stories of him too—Lukwesa of the sky-tree throne, Lukwesa of the golden eyes—and his adventures nine thousand years ago were a legend on every world he had touched. Kalonde had followed his footsteps and she’d found the world he’d come home to after an absence of eight centuries; she’d learned there of the tapestry he’d woven, and in retracing his journey, had found six pieces of it. They hung in the doorway that separated the cabin from the passage to the hold, tattered and maddeningly incomplete, but they contained three words in a flowing alien script and a scattering of points that could only be a map of stars.

She’d seen those same words, in a script very similar, on a manuscript in the depths of the Mutanda archives: Iteka rya Kwijima, Dark Eternity. And that manuscript had come from this world, Ishyanga, which was also where the star map pointed.

“Do you know the story of Chinkonkole the Navigator’s last voyage, musaza?” Kalonde asked Ngabo the seller of goods.

They were on an ancient wooden pier five meters above a muddy river delta, part of the maze of docks and floating islands that made up Ishyanga’s chief human town. A plate of fish and a jar of imbote—honey-beer—were on the table between them, both half-empty; to one side were the painted wooden disks that symbolized the cargo she’d brought to sell, and to the other, the brightly colored counters that, after a morning’s haggle, represented her price.

Ngabo looked back at her, uncomprehending. He was the only person on this world who spoke the Union’s language, and even he had little need for it—the fikondo wa intanda, the starships, might come calling once a decade or even less. And though Kalonde had learned as much of this world’s language, Kinyaishyanga, as she could, there hadn’t been many materials to study from. The bargaining had been more than a little difficult, and now, when Ngabo clearly expected her to name the things she wanted to buy with the counters, she was telling stories.

“There are as many tales of that voyage,” he said at last, “as there are worlds where he landed.”

Kalonde spread her hands across the table, conceding the point. “There is one we tell on Mutanda,” she said. “When Chinkonkole returned from his last conquest, he learned that his wife had died in his absence, defending against a raid two years before. He learned, also, that she had sent him a last message.”

“And?” Ngabo asked after a moment of silence.

Kalonde had lost the thread of the story—she was close here, so close—but she picked it up again. “So he calculated the time, down to the second, that had passed since that message, and he traveled through the ichiyawafu to a point exactly that many light-years away. There he found her voice, and he followed it at the speed of light, so it would be in his ears eternally. And somewhere, he hears it still.”

“We have a different story,” Ngabo said. “I can tell it to you if you want. But why did you tell me that one?”

“Because all the voices of the dead are out there. All of them. The ichiyawafu isn’t the true country of the dead—the space between the stars is.” She stood and swept her gaze across the lapping waters and fishermen’s pirogues to where her ship—the *Chiwinda na Foshi*, the *Hunter of Dreams*—had landed. “All the words left by the people who could build ships like that, who could make computers, who could fill minds with all the knowledge of humanity and fill bodies with machines that cure diseases. And not only that—the music, the plays, the chants to the orishas. Everything we lost when the Union fell is there.”

Ngabo looked at her evenly, waiting for her to finish. It was a look that many people had given her in seventy years of time and space. “There are stories of people who sought those things,” he said at last. “And all of them say the same thing—that the messages are lost, that within less than a light-year, they become so weak that the noise of the stars drowns them out.”

These were quelling words, but they were the words that Kalonde had been waiting for. “What, then,” she said, withdrawing a pebble from the folds of her chitenge and placing it next to the imbote jar, “is this?”

Ngabo took the pebble between his thumb and forefinger. It was a Listeners’ pebble like any other, slightly oblong and jet-black, with

a symbol on one side that bore more than a passing resemblance to Lukwesa's tapestry and the Kinyaishyanga script. He had clearly seen such things before—from all accounts, the pebbles were rife on this world—and he knew what to do; he touched his forefinger to the symbol and brushed it side to side.

And heard a human voice.

It was a male voice, speaking a version of the Union's language that was older than the Union, so archaic as to be nearly impossible to understand. A woman's voice answered, she too speaking words that were thousands of years dead. Only from the archives Kalonde had searched did she know that the voices were speaking of the investiture of a king, and the voices were beyond Ngabo altogether, but he was still stunned when they suddenly ceased.

"The king they speak of is known in Mutanda's records," Kalonde said. "He died twenty thousand years ago. And the Listeners never came to Mutanda, but they found these voices—they found them somewhere. And I have two more."

She reached out suddenly, pushed the counters back to Ngabo's side of the table. "I want you to hire men with these. The legends of the awantu, Lukwesa's tapestries—they all say that the Listeners had a settlement on this world. Hire men for me to dig it up, and we will learn how they made that recording."

Kalonde expected another bargain—Ngabo would surely want some of the workers' pay for himself, and would argue keenly over their wages and the price of their tools. What she didn't expect was laughter.

"The Dark Eternity?" Ngabo said. "Yes, we have stories of it—or I should say, the awantu do. But I can't hire men to dig it out for you. It was buried many thousands of years ago, and no one knows where it is."

The royal archivist didn't know either.

It took three days and two bribes for Kalonde to obtain an audience. For a kilogram of Mutanda blue-leaf, the town headman had passed her on to the king's provincial legate. Bribing the legate had been much harder. He was an awantu, a person of another creation; human drugs and spices held no interest for him, clothing was of little use to a being with an exoskeleton of iridescent chitin,

and the jewelry in Kalonde's ship was all wrong for his body and his race's fashion. But a wooden flute and a mbira—ah, *those* were a different story. Kalonde had the patterns and tools to make them, and they bought her a map to the awantu capital and a letter of introduction to K'aari, Keeper of Memory.

K'aari had needed no bribe other than stories. Awantu she might be, but she was one in spirit with the bakalamba, the university preceptors of Mutanda; she wanted to know, and knowing was enough.

But she didn't know where the Iteka rya Kwijima was.

"We worshiped the Listeners, once," she said; her rattling voice managed the Union's speech surprisingly well, better in fact than Ngabo had. "We made pilgrimages to their settlement to hear the voices of the worlds. But after they left us, the priesthood grew corrupt, there was a revolt . . . The ifapemba"—she used the Union's word for councilors—"decreed that it be forgotten." She gave another soft rattle from the depths of her throat; to a Keeper of Memory, any such decree was a loss, no matter the justification.

This wasn't the answer Kalonde wanted. But on Mutanda they said that every answer had a question, and she searched for the one to ask. "Are there records from before that, mbuya?" she said at last, giving the awantu the honorific she would have given a person on Mutanda with similar standing. "Before the decree?"

"If it were that easy," K'aari said, "don't you think I would know?" No, she wasn't one who would let an ancient edict stand in the way of learning. "The council was very thorough. But I can show them to you if you want. Maybe you'll see something that I could not."

And then K'aari led the way from her offices to the stairs that climbed the archive tower, past rooms and rooms and rooms of documents. The oldest were at the top, a plan that Kalonde recognized from many visits to dusty attics. But it wasn't an attic full of jumbled records that waited at the top of the stairs; it was an airy room that looked out on the domed towers of the city, with orderly shelves and a reading table at which, if the cups and game-board on its surface were anything to go by, K'aari spent a great deal of time.

"The works of our first poets are here," she said. "They go back forty thousand turnings. And the stories of the worlds are here—we learned of your people long before they came. The council's decree

was only against the Listeners' city, not their stories. These are left to us—to me, to you.”

Kalonde took a scroll from one of the shelves—carefully, carefully—and began unwinding it on the table. The writing, she noticed, wasn't the primitive pictographs that one might expect from the earliest days of literacy; it was a mature script, one that resembled the markings on the Listeners' pebbles even more than did this world's modern alphabet. And then she noticed the pebbles themselves—a box of them, more than she'd ever seen before in one place, with others strewn on the table and arranged on the game-board.

They, too, had obviously been exempted from the decree—or maybe they had been unearthed afterward, in whatever place the Umfwantu had left them. Could *that* be the key? “Tell me,” she said, “is there a place where more of these have been found than in other places?”

K'aari was silent for a moment, then realized what Kalonde had to be asking. “I'm afraid there are several such places. One of them may be the one you seek. But it would take many turnings to dig through them all.”

She took a pebble from the table and brushed the symbol—maybe she was hoping it might tell her? But what it held was the sound of rain, nothing more. She looked down at the board, surveyed its irregular shape and the chaotic spaces into which it was divided, and put the pebble on one.

“How do you play that game?” Kalonde asked. It seemed as good a question as any.

“You make patterns.”

“Just patterns?”

“Patterns of shape, patterns of sound, patterns of meaning. You make order from chaos.” K'aari passed a pebble to Kalonde, inviting her to place it.

She did, and there were others. She listened, she placed; she made patterns; she tried to break K'aari's pattern and then to complement it. After a while, K'aari called for a pitcher of imbote and a meal of firm-fleshed meat and the succulent creepers that grew in thickets on the hillsides. By now, the bacteria that Kalonde had traded for on her first day on Ishyanga had flourished enough that she could truly metabolize it, and it satisfied her hunger in a way that prior meals had not. She looked at the board again, saw that one of her patterns had

become a symbol like those on the pebbles—the symbols that the Listeners had taught K’aari’s race forty thousand turnings ago . . .

And she realized she’d found the pattern she was looking for.

“Are there legends about the origin of writing?” she asked. “About the person who first brought it to your nation?” The name *Prometheus* flashed through Kalonde’s mind, from a story so old that its origin had been forgotten even before the Migrations.

“Yes. Ttok of Dyala . . .”

“And where was Dyala?”

K’aari didn’t ask why Kalonde wanted to know, but she didn’t need to. She rose from the table and returned with a scroll. The poem began as she unrolled it, in an ancient epic style, and it told of Ttok’s birth, his childhood, the description of his country . . .

“Yes, I know that place,” K’aari said, letting the edge of the scroll fall from her grasp. “It has changed in all these turnings, but I know it. It’s fifty miles upstream from your people’s town, at a bend in the river. And yes”—she saw Kalonde’s raised hand, and quelled it—“this is one of the places where many pebbles are found.”

“Come to my ship,” Kalonde said.

K’aari followed her at once. *This race is a trusting one*, Kalonde thought; few humans on these backwater worlds would be so willing to board a strange ship that might belong to one of the fair folk or, more prosaically, a pirate. But the awantu’s instincts were good; whatever the superstitious might think of her, Kalonde was neither of these things.

In a short time, the *Chiwinda na Foshi* hovered above the bend in the river. Below was land that would be called umushitu on Mutanda—swampy thickets of thorns—and it was impenetrable even from low overhead, with no sign of a city or even ruins. But the ship had instruments that could map the land, and Kalonde had learned that, with the proper setting, they could map below it.

The computers spoke a dead language—it had been fourteen hundred years since the Union fell, and no new ones had been made since then—but Kalonde knew it, and she gave commands. And on the screen that faced the captain’s chair, shapes appeared—outlines of walls, arranged in a symbol that she knew all too well. The Iteka rya Kwijima, she was sure, was found.

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Ngabo's men brought machetes to cut through the thorns and planks to lay down a path through the swampland. They brought picks and shovels to dig, crowbars to shift stones, and brushes and trowels for the fine work. But so far, there was no fine work to do.

There were only a few outbuildings—that was one of the mysteries. That was wrong for a settlement, or even for a base. A few squat sheds had been dug out, all made of an unknown ceramic, none of them marked and far too small to provide storage for a village or town.

And if that was a mystery, the main building was a greater one. They had dug out nearly all of it now, smooth cream ceramic walls that became irregular as they rose toward a sloping roof. Much of the surface was now uncovered, the earth removed from the cracks with fine brushes. But the walls were as unmarked as the sheds, and there was nothing that even began to resemble an entrance. Whatever the building might be, Kalonde would never find out what it was if she couldn't get in.

On the third day, she took the *Chiwinda na Foshi* up again and flew low over the umushitu in a spiral search pattern. She looked much more closely than before, searching for small anomalies where the building itself had been a flashing sign. She found three and, with K'aari in tow, landed near the most promising.

She had changed her chitenge for coarse trousers and a tunic, and she had a pick and shovel herself—she'd carried them, and joined in the work, since the first day. Now she and K'aari beside her applied them with a will. The ground was higher here, stony and less swampy, and the progress was painfully slow . . . until suddenly it yielded all at once as rocks and earth tumbled into a hole and Kalonde had to brace herself with the pick to keep from falling in.

Her lamp told her that the hole wasn't deep, and that a rough-hewn passage led away and down in the direction of the building. She felt of the ground, chose a handhold and lowered herself in carefully. K'aari did the same and looked past her into looming darkness . . .

There was a loud report—the sound of a weapon fired in the air—and distant shouts of consternation.

Kalonde pulled herself up with her arms so her head was above the ground, and she strained to listen. "Disperse!" someone called—the

legate, she realized. “This is a forbidden place! Disperse!” There was more shouting, and then the sound of people beginning to scatter.

“The decree,” she hissed to K’aari. “It’s still in force?”

“Of course not—after that many thousand turnings, after the kingdom has fallen and risen four times over? When the state falls, the laws fall. But some of the king’s ancestors are from priestly families, and the legate’s clan is jealous—they may suspect that he will use this place to increase his power. Some families still follow the old feuds, even after all this time.”

The legate had been happy to pass Kalonde on to the capital in return for a bribe, but now that she had found what she sought, her gift was evidently forgotten. Human and awantu, sometimes, could be little different in their intrigues.

She put her hand to the weapon at her side, but thought better of it even as she did; the legate would have brought too many troops to fight. “We should go to the king . . .”

“It will take time to see him, even for me. By then, they will have buried this place again, and they will make sure you are expelled from this world.” K’aari swung her pick up suddenly and, before Kalonde could react, struck at the ground above them, bringing dirt and rocks down to fill the hole.

“We have food and water,” she said. “I’m sure this passage leads to the entrance—we’ll go inside before they can get to us, and dig out when they’re gone.” She turned her lamp down the passage and began picking her way down, shining the light on the floor and measuring her steps carefully. Kalonde, lacking a better plan, followed in her wake.

There *was* a door at the end of the passage, a thousand meters from the hole. And that was the third mystery.

It was made of the same ceramic as the outbuildings, set into a wall, and there was no obvious way to open it. There were no levers or buttons, no keyhole, no place to insert a card—none of the places where the thieves’ tools Kalonde had gathered on a dozen worlds might gain purchase. Crowbars wouldn’t shift it, and it was impervious to blows from a pick. But then, as she cleared earth from just above the doorway, she saw it—the beginnings of symbols cut into the wall, the first markings she had seen anywhere in this place.

K’aari saw too and crowded in beside her, digging into the ceiling

carefully, working earth from where the symbols were etched. There were three, matching Ishyanga's script in its most ancient form, and Kalonde recognized them; they were a variation on Lukwesa's tapestry, a form of the word for the Listeners themselves, an injunction to listen.

Kalonde listened. She stood at the door, willed herself to perfect silence, gave her attention.

Nothing happened.

She listened more. She heard voices from the direction of the hole, and a shouted order to get picks and shovels. The legate's troops had found the passage. There would be more to listen to in a short time—the sounds of digging, and soon enough the legate's cry of triumph.

But K'aari had noticed something.

"I've seen symbols written that way before, in the old poems," she breathed, the merest rattle in her throat. "I think it means 'we listen.' And the third symbol—it was used in prayer, in worship, in offerings to the ancient gods."

This had been an ichipembwe, a worship place, for K'aari's people once. Had it been so for the Listeners themselves? And at once, Kalonde realized what offering a Listener might make, or want.

"I speak," she said, facing the door. "I speak in my own voice."

And slowly, silently, the door slid open.

It closed behind them as they passed. That was all right; they knew how to open it again, and they were sealed off now from the legate's troops. He had no scholar with him.

Beyond was a single room bathed in dim white light that seemed to come from nowhere. And here was the fourth mystery. The room occupied the entire building, but there was no evidence of machines—nothing that might amplify signals from the void, no device for impressing those signals onto pebbles. Wherever the lost voices of the Union might be, there was no evidence that they were collected here.

Instead, there were rows of benches between bare walls, and other things besides; perches, crossbars hung from the ceiling, pedestals, webs. Facing them, where the room grew narrow, were two flared columns, and between those, an oddly shaped table that resembled a leaf or an ear . . . or, Kalonde suddenly realized, K'aari's game board.

Kalonde knew what function this form followed. Yes, this was a

worship place. But how was this the Dark Eternity? There was nothing eternal, nothing dark—in fact, in the time it had taken Kalonde to survey the room, the light had become almost day-bright.

But then, as the light rose, the walls changed.

They appeared first on the far walls, behind the columns and the table—images of dozens of races of awantu, and then, spreading around the room, hundreds. All the races whose images Kalonde had collected were there, and many more from worlds yet unknown to humans, and . . .

“Lukwesa,” she whispered.

Yes, Lukwesa—she had seen too many images of him to mistake him for anyone else. From a distance, he might be taken for any member of his race—three meters tall, gaunt and long-armed, mottled gray and white scales, golden eyes set back in a trilaterally symmetric head—but there was the missing scale below his lower forearm, there the scar across his chest given him by the inkanyamba who had guarded a hoard of voice-pebbles in the deep ocean, there the forked tattoo with which the impundulu, the lightning-bird, had rewarded him. And there was something in his face, alien as it may be, that told of his questing personality, marked him as a kindred spirit.

Now Kalonde was sure that, no matter what the legends said, the Listeners weren’t a race, nor were they shape-changers. They were—had been—a cult, a religion. They had collected voices and scattered them, for what reason? To spread the voices’ spiritual life around the galaxy? A sharing, a seeding? There were no inscriptions to answer that question, however, and Kalonde despaired of knowing.

Lukwesa, though, had joined the cult—of *that*, Kalonde was certain—and he’d gone on to find the Iteka rya Kwijima. Was it here somehow after all? Had he found it *from* here? Was his visit to this place before or after his eight hundred years’ absence?

Was there a way his image might tell her?

Without realizing it, Kalonde had walked toward the image and stopped in front of the game board—no, she realized, the *altar*. What was a game to K’aari had been a ritual once. And K’aari recognized this too. “Our word for ‘game’ is ubwiru,” the scholar said, “but to the ancient poets, it meant secret worship—initiation into the mysteries.”

The fifth mystery.

Make patterns, Kalonde remembered. She saluted Lukwesa's image hands over eyes, in the manner of his race, and sought one. She withdrew a handful of pebbles from the purse at her belt, considered their symbols, their voices, their song...

A song was a pattern. No, something more universal—*music* was a pattern. On Mutanda there were three musical scales: five notes, seven and nine. She made the five-note scale first, selecting pebbles that recorded each of its tones, playing them with a flick of a finger and arranging them on the board in the shape of a musical staff. Then seven notes alongside it and nine underneath them both.

She stepped back from the board—would those patterns be enough? Lukwesa's image didn't move, but a symbol appeared above him, the same offering-symbol that had been incised above the door.

Kalonde's offering at the door had been her voice, but she sensed that this wouldn't be enough now. Another voice, maybe, or voices—voices the Umfwantu had never heard. And with the musical notes she'd laid down still in her ears, she realized she had them.

She had carried her own recordings with her aboard the *Hunter of Dreams*—she had sought voices from distant worlds, but she also wanted reminders of Mutanda. She had a player in her pocket, an artifact of the Union fourteen hundred years gone, but new recordings still were made, and she played one now. It was the great symphony of Bukata of Kabwe, drums and mbira, flutes and single-string gourds and three-string gourds, pipes and xylophones, and voices, voices. They filled the room—the acoustics were perfect, Kalonde realized—and even K'aari, who knew an entirely different musical tradition, fell under its spell.

And at the end, Lukwesa's image, a ghostly projection now, stood in front of the altar.

He too held voice-pebbles in his hands, and as he raised them, an image of the galaxy appeared above them—not the pitifully small portion that humans had explored, but all of it in stunning, starry glory. He took one of the pebbles and cast it on the board, and one of the stars—Ishyanga's star—glowed a brilliant red as the words of one of K'aari's poets filled the chamber. He cast another pebble and another star came to life, this one far inward toward the galactic core. Others came after, each igniting a star, each releasing its voice.

The game, the ritual, was to make patterns. Kalonde waited to see what Lukwesa's pattern would be, and then she did see it.

He had cast at least a hundred pebbles, and now they formed a sphere, enclosing a region of the galaxy. Then a last one, releasing a sound that she felt but was far too low to hear, and an apparition in the center of the sphere, one that *didn't* glow, a dark, swirling mass. And next to it, a symbol.

"Eternity," whispered K'aari.

Dark Eternity.

Lukwesa had found the Iteka rya Kwijima, but not here. What he had found here was a map, a guide to the far-flung members of the cult, a message in their gathering-place. Suddenly, Kalonde was sure what the missing part of Lukwesa's tapestry showed. And she was sure where she had to go.

The *Chiwinda na Foshi* had brought one person to Ishyanga. It took two away. "The Dark Eternity calls me too," K'aari had said, "and in a hundred turnings, the legate's clan might forget about me." And so, cramped as the cabin was, room had been made.

The passage through the ichiyawafu was the longest that Kalonde had ever made, more than four thousand light years, inward from the edge of the Orion Spur to the Sagittarius Arm. Her journey-dream was equally intense. She had thought she might dream of Lukwesa, but Chinkonkole came to her instead; ancient and white-haired, staring through his ship's port at the blue converging trails of the stars, his wife's message filling the cabin as he raced with it through space and time. She felt herself there with him, and then somehow she was the ship, straining against the limits of physics, pressed against forever...

And she awoke to see that the date on the Union computer's display had changed from the Year of Migration 31,647 to 31,649, and to hear every alarm in the ship wailing.

She was instantly alert and her eyes flashed to her instruments, but nothing seemed wrong with the ship, and she wondered if it was the alarms that had failed. But then she looked out the port. What she saw was not the star and planets she expected, but a spot—no, *two* spots—of absolute nothingness, surrounded by swirling maelstroms of gas that met in turbulent streams of red and grew yellow-white

and painfully bright at the center. The leading edge of the nearer vortex was terrifyingly close, and as the voids circled each other, pulses of gravity threatened to tear the ship apart with tidal forces.

Kalonde knew what these were—intanda na ngapondo, crushed stars. There were legends of them, told with fearful awe; stories of mariners who were never heard from again, time-traps where even the fair folk dared not go. Dark eternity this was indeed. But what would have brought the Listeners to such a place? What would bring *anyone* to such a place, she wondered as she and K'aari brought the ship to emergency power and then beyond it, fighting to get clear of the maelstrom.

Slowly, then faster, the *Hunter of Dreams* drew away from the swirling chaos—it hadn't been at the point of no return, not quite. Kalonde angled the ship above the orbital plane where the turbulence was less, seeking a panoramic view, looking for what the Listeners might have left here. And then she saw.

It was small, not a world or even an asteroid, no larger than a ship or a small station, but it stood out because it was moving incredibly fast. The *Chiwinda na Foshi's* instruments showed it at ninety-nine percent of light speed—possibly far more, since that was their maximum reading—and it shifted deeply into the red as it moved out of their field of view. For a moment, Kalonde thought it might be Chinkonkole's ship after all, but Chinkonkole would have traveled much farther by now than a mere four thousand light years, and then the object returned to view, shifting blue, moving *toward* her.

She could see enough of its path by now to know that it was orbiting the crushed stars. It wasn't a natural orbit either—it was a powered one, and her mind reeled as she imagined *how much* power it must need to maintain that speed. But the maelstrom of gases millions of degrees hot held ample fuel, and it would need that speed to get away when the two crushed stars inevitably merged. And at such speeds, an orbit that might otherwise be years long was reduced to days. Maybe the Listeners had wanted to minimize the time that passed before the station returned to a certain point...

"Look now!" K'aari cried.

Kalonde looked where K'aari was pointing, past the station and to the darkness beyond, to the stars that should have been too dim to

see but which were now brilliant candles with vivid features. And suddenly, she knew.

K'aari's race knew nothing of gravity lensing—to her, what she was seeing was a marvel beyond imagining. It *was* known on Mutanda, and Kalonde had even used it sometimes in navigation, but she had never seen it like this. One crushed star was a lens of unparalleled intensity; where the focal points of *two* such lenses overlapped and were powered by rippling gravity waves, it might be possible to see anything.

Or to *hear* anything—even a signal otherwise long lost in the void.

“K'aari, mbuya na wambuya,” she said as she dove toward the focal point, “let us hear what the ship hears.” And a moment later, the word taken for the deed, the cabin filled with sound—static and cacophony at first, but then suddenly a symphony.

It was in no musical form known to humanity or to any of the thousand known races of awantu. The instruments were alien and eerie; the voices ranged in unearthly harmony sometimes passing out of hearing as they became too low or too high for human ears; it sounded sometimes as if both the orchestra and the singers were in a thick fluid. But it was true music: a gift to the spirit, a gift from the soul.

Where had it come from? Kalonde's fingers danced across the computer terminal, tracing the direction of the signal, the movements of stars. But there was nothing that had been in that symphony's path, no place it could possibly have come from, short of . . . Andromeda?

And then, as the music built to a crescendo, there was static again, and silence.

Fragments, Kalonde realized. Fragments of the Union's voices came here. Fragments of *everyone's* voices came here. Fragments to be pieced together. And ahead was the station that had collected them for more thousands of years than Kalonde's or K'aari's ancestors could imagine and recorded them for the Umfwantu to scatter—to make into patterns.

It seemed Kalonde could see those patterns through the crushed stars' lens. And she realized she had become a Listener in truth—that she might always have been one.

There was no longer any question of where she would go now. But there was K'aari to consider. "I can take you home first," she said.

"Home? Home is where there are millions of turnings of poems that no one living has ever read."

Kalonde nodded. She had expected no other answer. "Time to match orbit with the station," she said in the dead language of the Union's computers. And a moment later, the answer flashed on the screen: SUBJECTIVE TIME, 58.918 DAYS; OBJECTIVE TIME, 40.069 YEARS.

Dark Eternity, yes. The eternity of speed. Suddenly, Lukwesa's absence of eight centuries was explained; suddenly, the stories of the Listeners' uwufwiti, witchcraft, made sense. And the station was moving faster still; how many more decades—centuries—would pass in the time it took her to find the Union's secrets, and how many more in the time it took to piece their fragments together?

It won't matter to K'aari. She will stay—the station will hold more than she could learn in a lifetime. But when a thousand years have passed, I will return at last to Mutanda. Maybe I will return with pebbles to scatter; maybe, like Ishyanga's Prometheus or Old Earth's, I will bring back knowledge. Though maybe, by that time, the people of what once was the Union will have rediscovered it themselves.

She would return with stories, at the very least. She wondered if there would be stories of *her* by then, and who, from what far world, would come questing after them.